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Current Art Topics

By "MAHLSTICK," London Correspondent

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FOR more years than any of my readers can number the Exhibitions of the Old Water Color Society have—with those of the Royal Academy—been regarded as among the prominent fixtures of the artistic and also indeed, of the social year in the English metropolis. It is without question the doyen of societies existing for the encouragement and development of the Art of the Aquarellist. The exhibitions have been held for more than a generation in its home in Pall Mall, but a few yards distant from the National Gallery, not a few of the treasures of which were originally exhibited in the salon of the Old Water Color Society—the O. W. S. as it is phonetically and familiarly termed in Art

circles. The building though not ornate yet has a certain bijou and cachet-like character, not unsuited to the dainty art which it enshrines. This has a note of distinctiveness, which may in fact be written distinction; an indefinable air of reserve—of good taste—of fine manners, so to speak, that pervades the one spacious gallery which houses the pictures. The very visitors themselves seem different from the bourgeoisie of the Bond Street Galleries; they are doubtless in reality the same, but I imagine must adapt their bearing to their environment; the clothes and the manners suited to a Futurist Show or the minauderies of an Augustus John circus would be jarringly out of tune amid the high-toned work at the

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Old Water Color Society. Yet it is not to be inferred that the society is in any sense a backwater, or in any way side-tracked.

The art of the O. W. S. has corporately always preserved a certain cachet of its own, there is a sense of aristocratic tradition in its shows, a static aloofness from that varying ebb and flow in art theories and practice which is so marked a feature of our time, but which has mostly left them more flotsam and jetsam high and dry and discarded. Yet no fresh conception in painting proving itself to be in line with the accepted traditions of art, which are but the sum total of the world's previous proved achievement, is refused a welcome to the entourage of the society. So we find here linked with the older canons, techniques and ideals, the daring and miraculous bravura of Sargent's sketches, the pedantic archaic yet fascinating mysticism of Cayley Robinson, or the quaint and delicate glimpses of Arthur Rackham into the land of "Eerie."

There is, however, one criticism of the society, which indeed is true of all corporate art bodies run on the life membership basis, but which is particularly in evidence in this case, that its vigorous and green old age seems to an unusual degree to be reflected in the longevity apparently attaching to membership. This results in a proportion of work exhibited by veterans belonging to phases or fashions for the moment stale and out of date, and in any case lacking that freshness and vigor of inspiration which, in their youth gave it its value and justification. I wish it to be understood, however, that because a phase is out of date, that is not evidence against its intrinsic merit; Turner himself, painting the style we know him by, would probably bore us stiff in this very year of grace 1917, in which the ideals and methods of 1817 of Girtin and Varley and the early English Aquarellists, hardly a generation before him, are again being widely adopted. The art and technique of Pinwell, Fred Walker, Herkomer and others completely demodé for the moment, will doubtless in a few generations be welcomed as the latest and smartest thing in water color; but always, for the time being, nothing is so much

taboo as the art phase, whatever it is, that has just gone by.

This trait in our nature is not perhaps always sufficiently considered in these exhibitions. The status in the hierarchy of painters attaching to membership of this society is of the highest, and but little below that of membership of the Royal Academy; and indeed few members of that, the premier corporation but would gladly gain admission to the O. W. S.

Water color painting as we know it is quite a modern event in art; of course tempera and gouache may be said to antedate oil painting, to which they are much nearer akin than to aquarelle. I think I am right in saying that the method of getting pictorial effect by transparent washes of color on white paper, on a scale beyond the works of the Illuminators of the Middle Ages, dates but little earlier than the beginning of the last century. Sepia drawings on a cabinet scale are of quite ancient lineage. I have seen most elaborate and beautiful little pictures in sepia by Claude Loraine, and studies of figures, and of architecture were as frequently made in outline and monotone washes as in chalk or crayons by the Old Masters, but the experiment was limited to tinting only, the gamut of oil or tempera painting does not seem to have been ventured upon.

It is generally conceded that the credit of being the pioneers in this new field of pictorial technique belongs to the English School, in which connection, the names of its early masters De Wint, Girtin, Varley, Turner and Duncan immediately occur to our minds. Even these men, with the exception of Turner in his later period, only ventured on color within a very limited range. There are several explanations of this reticence and reserve. First in the landscape painting of that day no one except Constable had dared to essay the full range of Nature's color scheme. The theory prevailed that the wonderful concerto in green of an English summer landscape was outside the scope and purpose of art, and of the painter's palette of that day, hence all landscape conformed more or less to the dictum of that distinguished dilettante Sir George

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Beaumont—that greenwood and meadow, hill and dale should pictorially suggest the coloring of a Cremona fiddle. The sky—figures—and architecture were alone rendered in their true color values. But beyond this reason, color in early water color landscape painting was restricted owing to the meagre palette then at the service of the artist.

It is even said that tobacco juice occasionally did duty as a pigment. This is rather puzzling because the miniaturists and illuminators of the very earliest periods and the French painters in gouache of the 17th and 18th centuries in those pictures in miniature of subjects from the nude—of which the Wallace Museum has an unsurpassed collection—were served by a palette of wide and liberal range. One would naturally imagine the transition into pure tint to be both easy and speedy. In the event it did not prove so, and in fact water color painting as we know it is a development of the sepia wash, rather than an evolution from the technique of the missal painter.

However, this may be, the Art of the Aquarellist, from the most modest beginning, has in little more than a century attained an importance in Modern Art in no way inferior in the scope potential and actual of its achievement, to its rival, oil-painting, though this fact does not, at present, seem to be fully appreciated I believe, in America.


Interesting though the subject would be, we can only devote a few lines to a consideration of the technical features of what Herkomer used to term "this most difficult but fascinating medium." Some, possibly many, of my readers will feel some surprise to hear described as difficult a medium popularly associated with the artistic efforts of school girls and lady amateurs. It is not merely difficult, but among themselves it is confessed to be the despair of the artist as craftsman, but admittedly also his delight. The late E. J. Gregory, R. A., whose water-color "Dawn," seven inches by nine, sold in the Galloway Sale at Christies about ten years ago for \$2,300.00, frequently said to the writer, "I know nothing

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about water-color." It is a commonplace among aquarellists that the longer they are at it, the less they know about it, which interpreted amounts to saying that increased experience only enlarges their knowledge of the countless variations of manipulation. In a definite pliancy and varied adaptability it is far more sensitive than the more powerful and rigid rival medium—oil.

There is also a sense of magic in the craftsmanship which with a sheet of white paper and tinted water can evolve the light and air of a sky, the depth and brilliancy of summer foliage, can absolutely mirror the rose and the lily in their perfection, which can render the svelte beauty of a woman's form, the gloss of silk, the softness of fur, the glitter of metal and pottery, in short the material vision of the world about us. Moreover, these results can be attained not merely by one method or treatment of the material, but by countless ways, the differently prepared surfaces of the paper from the roughest grain to those as

smooth as ivory, all its qualities, even its accidents are pressed into his service by the artist. As opposed as the poles are the different methods of working out the relation of the pigment to the paper. The earlier generation of painters were anxious above everything, to preserve the surface just as it came from the mill; the washes of color were laid on with the utmost care and precision, so as to obtain a crystalline purity of effect, and the slightest admixture of white pigment was abhorrent.

I knew of two sworn friends, parting forever, after a farewell meal in common, on this question of "body color" as it is technically termed. At one time I believe it was practically impossible to obtain election to the "Old Water Color" on the part of any artist who was suspected of using this very helpful adjunct. Then came in the sixties and seventies the School of Pinwell, Frederic Walker, Hubert Herkomer and their followers who used body color right through a drawing, and

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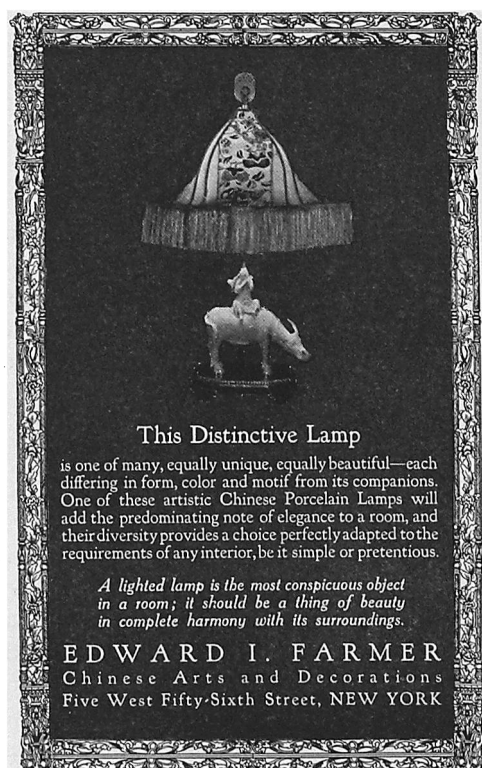
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with results that are priceless today, in the picture market. At the opposite pole are the men who begin by destroying the surface of the paper, some going so far—like Charles John Collings, Edgar Bundy, or the late Alma Tadema—as to wash the paper over first with black or brown, and the effect of removing this got the paper into "condition" as they designate it. It is no unusual occurrence for Bundy to get right through the paper so that it requires to be backed.

My readers can now get some idea of the infinite possibilities that water-color offers to the artistic temperament to express its varying modes and the appeal that it also makes to popular taste by its daintiness, and the fact that all the beauty of material things, the dreams of a Rosetti, the landscape visions of a Charles John Collings, or a Baird, are enshrined in one slight film of color on a sheet of paper. The picture in oil seems gross, palpable and material by comparison. To much modern water-color, such as that of Collings or Baird, the term "wrought" can be most aptly applied. The effect is not obtained by direct application of washes, but the paper and the color are as it were, worked about this way and that, their very accidents of interaction on each other are taken advantage of by the painter and moulded to his purpose, with the patience and instinctive skill of the inspired craftsman, till in the result the world is the richer by a masterpiece of artistry and craftsmanship of which money but feebly represents the value. This is more and more realized by those nations whose taste has been matured by generations of art culture. Water-color drawings within their scale of size and allowing for the fact that their quite recent evolution in art denies them the same interest and value attaching to works belonging to the historic schools and epochs of the Old Masters, yet on the average command higher prices in Europe than corresponding works in oil. The demand for them by the public and collectors is at least in the ratio of three to two.



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